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ABSTRACT

Public education is controlled by government bureaucracy; teacher education has been regulation-driven and paperwork-intensive. This paper proposes an alternative response by teacher education to the dilemma--namely, that educators should establish their own identity and develop innovative curriculum and instruction. Within teacher education there is a loosely knit school of theorists called Reconceptualists who since the early 1970s have kept a sharp focus on innovation in educational theory. The Reconceptualists have emphasized the phenomenological approach, have been early proponents of qualitative research methods, and advocate using theory to create social change. For example, in debating the private school-voucher issue, Reconceptualists would focus on historical precedents and issues of class and race, rather than test scores and economic efficiency. They challenge the claim that schools exist primarily to create a productive work force. A common theme among Reconceptualist critiques is that the debate on educational issues is undertheorized and controlled by powerful persons outside of education. Educators are encouraged to press the debate on multicultural and gender equity to its logical limits, including class and the distribution of wealth in the analysis. Finally, progress in education is tied to self-regulation. (LMI)

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Reconceptualizing the Control of Education

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Public education--from preschool through teacher preparation--is controlled from without. In an ongoing, historical trend legislators, state officials, and the courts have secured direct, plenary authority over faculty, administrators, and other school personnel. When public money--taxpayers' money--is involved as it is in public education, government oversight is necessary and inevitable. The nature of the intervention is, however, open to interpretation, and in public education the intrusiveness of government non-educators is unprecedented among professions. The norm in establishing accountability in comparable fields is through autonomous boards composed of members of the profession in question. Such entities define and enforce preparation rules and entry and retention into the field. They are given broad authority to define the profession and its mode of practice. In education, despite the movement toward professional practices boards, initiative and authority still typically emanate from the legislature. These interventions can be as specific as the requirement that preservice teachers have a specified number of clock hours of training on a specific topic, e.g., 20 hours of substance abuse course work in Minnesota.

In teacher education this governance tradition has created a pattern of extensive bureaucratic requirements that often result from lobbies or legislators seeking to exercise influence in a favored field. On a national level this is well-illustrated by the America/Goals 2000 campaign which was launched by the National Governors' Association and adopted by two presidents. Like A Nation at Risk it is the creation of "policy wonks" and other non-educators who can provoke a burst of media attention, only to disappear when the hard work and consequences of their proposals come due. The new congress has threatened to abandon the 2000 initiative in a pattern of inconstancy that is typical of government intervention into schooling. A Nation at Risk offers an equally troublesome legacy as we now discover that the government suppressed a timely response by education scholars to the thesis of this report and thereby provoked, in Berliner and Biddle's term, a "manufactured crisis" in education throughout the 1980s.

The costs of government arbitrariness and micromanagement are various, but some of the most cogent are these: Educators define themselves as functionaries who are led by others, thus creating a culture of reactivity and an exodus of leadership talent from the profession. Educators respond in kind to the medium of government control and nourish a jungle of paperwork requirements (as through NCATE) designed to meet regulation on its own terrain. The profession is then seen by potential allies as overly-bureaucratic and technical, missing the forest for the trees. It is perceived as mechanistic and devoid of the human touch even though it is populated with persons whose original motive was direct service to others. Finally, education becomes static, dissipating its resources in reactive and technical efforts. There remains neither the energy nor the will to modernize and adapt schools and teacher education in appropriate ways.

My purpose here is to propose an alternate response by teacher education to the dilemma in which we find ourselves. For forty years or more the profession has attempted to meet the bureaucratic style on its own terms and has thereby earned the reputation in the university community of being regulation-driven and paperwork intensive. Though ours should be the home discipline of fine teaching we have not established that identity for ourselves, and innovation in curriculum and instruction supported by offices of educational development are more often found in other professional schools, not our own.

We are too caught in a web of precedent, tradition, and legalism to suddenly reverse course or invite radical change, but there are reform pathways open to us and the beginnings of a solution. At its core, our field, like all of higher education, is characterized by the creation and use of ideas. Ideas, we know, have the power to revolutionize society in a manner outside narrow cause and effect relations--as in the classic example of Rousseau's Romanticism turning the court aristocracy against its own grandeur in favor of "nature" and "the simple life" in the years prior to the French Revolution. Within teacher education there is a loosely-knit school of theorists called Reconceptualists who since the early seventies have kept a sharp focus on innovation in educational theory. This established but unconventional school of educational thought offers the mainstream a chance at peaceful revolution in the way teacher education is conducted. We cannot in a swift action seize control over our profession

after so many decades of the erosion of power, but we can make a deliberate effort to capture the educational imagination--the ideational vanguard of the field.

It can be argued that the Reconceptualist point of view is already succeeding at gradually defining the new center of educational theory and practice, but the process is not deliberate and could as easily become cooptation as constructive change. The Reconceptualists, for example, have from their inception emphasized the phenomenological viewpoint. Seeking verisimilitude in educational experience--Dewey's "problem method" being a famous example--is a phenomenological guideline which is best illustrated today in performance outcomes assessment. The value of OBE still remains in doubt, however, since this reform may yet become no more than another manifestation of 1920s standardized testing. That is, if performance ultimately is evaluated by timed, objective, paper and pencil tests, the essence of the reform--its replication of "real life"--will be lost. Therein lies the difference between adopting a Reconceptualist concept in spirit or coopting it to dress up shopworn and discredited notions.

The Reconceptualists were early exponents of qualitative research methods, a fringe perspective in the seventies which became acceptable in the eighties: recognized in the most mainstream journals of educational research and by former renowned advocates of the quantitative approach. Without a deeper appreciation of the sources of the Reconceptualists' advocacy, however, we are likely to see the new methodological openness lead to a surprising lack of change in the impact of education. The motive underlying the Reconceptualists' drive for methodological alternatives was to create social change, but the community of professional education is likely to create a new, formalistic orthodoxy out of these methods which serve the old purposes of research. When looked upon with the benefit of time's passage, it can be argued that in education, methodological conventions have been used less to reform education than to create a professional cadre of specialists who dialogue with one another and become increasingly remote from the world of practice and schools. If their focus is on method and their aim is "scientific truth," professors will continue their past irrelevance albeit in new trappings. The Reconceptualists have sought open expression and the introduction of passion to educational discourse even at the expense of precision and scientism. Their insight is that education is political and

emotional at its source, not objective and logical. That, in Rorty's phrase, we are a "refuge for the enthusiasts," those who seek inspiration and hope.

II.

For nearly twenty-five years the Reconceptualists have met at annual conferences, published (since 1976) *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, and been represented in the literature by countless books and articles. Generations of young faculty have been a part of the print and public dialogue: appearing on the program of the conferences and participating in the associated conversations; gradually assuming roles of academic and institutional leadership in universities and professional societies across North America and beyond. Since the Reconceptualists arose in the manner of an avante-garde and maintain some of the anti-establishment flavor of such movements, there remains an apartness to their relation to the mainstream of professional education. If that habitual separation could be overcome and the full force of Reconceptualist theorizing brought consciously to the central debates of the field, we as educators would be in a stronger position to assert appropriate authority over our profession and its governance.

Currently, to again use the Minnesota example, Governor Arne Carlson has made school vouchers his first priority in the legislature. Carlson pledges to focus the state's policy debate on public support of private education through vouchers until his goal to change the character of urban education is achieved. The education community, especially as represented in higher education, will have to force its way into the forum of debate, since our political leaders have other sources of policy inspiration. If and when professors of education have an opportunity to state their opinions, however, joining the debate on the terms dictated by the governor's team will lead to an early dismissal of the arguments of educators. A Reconceptualist approach to the discussion, however, would focus on historical precedents and issues of class and race, rather than test scores and economic efficiency.

The public has not been made generally aware of the correlations between SAT achievement and family income. They have not been drawn into reflection on the critical theorists' contention that our so-called impartial screens for merit serve well in

reproducing power and wealth in the hands of a shrinking sub-minority. The public has similarly been excluded from a discussion of the schools as a reflection of society. We can go back to *A Nation at Risk* or Sputnik, or to the Life Adjustment Curriculum, Progressivism, or beyond to document example of attacks on the schools in the modern era. But we cannot find a time when the public acknowledged how responsive the schools are to the community; how effectively democracy functions to give towns and cities the schools they want; and how the general shortfall of vision and sympathy for repression in the citizenry has brought us to the situation in which we find ourselves.

Because of their application of psychoanalytic principles to interpretations of society, the Reconceptualists bring the debate onto such terrain. The cycle of blame and scapegoating which characterizes discussions of public education can thereby be forced to a more insightful level. A debate of certain foundational issues--long overdue--could finally be held. To this point, for example, the claim that schools exist primarily to create a productive work force constantly reappears in popular discussions of education and largely goes unchallenged. The idea that public education in America was established to create a citizenry capable of self-government rarely is entered into the discussion. Historically, however, we know that citizenship, a lofty manifestation of liberal education, is the raison d'etre for our schools. Our schools have this spiritual and political origin that attracts many service-oriented persons to the field of teaching. But popular misconceptions--in this case the economic mission of schools as opposed to the human growth and social mission--are given such extensive currency that we must acknowledge the possibility that they might become the new reality.

The level of debate on the relative success of the institution of public education, P-12, is similarly distorted. Should standardized test scores be the determining criterion of the schools' achievements? If so, how should the expansion of the base of students taking the most popular--the SAT--be factored in? To this point editorial writers and television pundits refuse to complicate their simplified scenarios by addressing this change in context. Their bias is similarly revealed when reversal of this trend and rising scores went unreported. How should the fact that twice as high a percentage of students complete high school now as did in the 1940s be interpreted? We hear

frequently of our alleged failure with drop-outs, while this enormous transformation goes undiscussed.

The public schools are bitingly criticized for excessive administrative costs, but no calling to accounts is held for legislators who impose reporting and managing functions on schools in the form of unfunded mandates that must be provided from existing school resources. Dramatic increases in education funding in the past dozen years have resulted in very little budgetary impact on classroom instruction because of the unbridled growth of such reform schemes and the use of public schools to implement them. With unrestricted irony public schools' overhead is finally contrasted invidiously with private schools who are spared many of these same obligations.

The tenor of our social values is also left out of an understanding of the schools. Our culture of affluence, individualism, and passivity is not seen as the context in which schools must function. Our unprecedented prosperity has reduced the imperative of hard work in the value system of the professional classes. At the same time our classism and racial polarization convinces many minority youth that their situation is beyond redemption and sincere effort would be wasted. Although the reasons are this diverse for schools, the consequence is similar: students coasting through, investing little and learning little. As with the issues cited above, there is a role for Reconceptualist thought in addressing these issues.

In response to school curriculum and the lack of engagement it fosters, we should be asking why we remain trapped in formalism at a time when even good students are little engaged in the curriculum. Although society has become extremely complicated, electronically accessible, and challenging economically, the curriculum remains comfortably detached. To cite a case in point: we so neglect the issue of how to manage debt and borrowing in our education of young persons, that the average person seems to think that there is no issue of this type with which to be concerned. Although earning a good salary is on students' minds, avoiding debt and usurious interest rates is not. The attitude among many is simply to borrow whatever one can at whichever rates are available. The merit of buying a home, rather than renting, is similarly unrecognized. How can these basic, practical issues be so neglected? How can the concepts of delayed gratification and sound personal financial management

not be on the agenda of schools?

The common theme running through these examples is the manner in which the debate on educational issues is under-theorized and controlled by persons with power outside of education. The response urged here is to employ the literature of the Reconceptualists as a means of seizing the debate on education. Well-intentioned educators cannot prevail in the debate as it is now structured: a qualitative shift in the issues being examined and their context must be accomplished. Meeting this debate on the established ground cannot yield results favorable to education as the best among us conceive it.

III.

The essays that follow will detail in explicit terms the ways in which the Reconceptualist perspective informs practice in a variety of well-known teacher education programs. It is up to the reader to determine how these projects and practices differ from conventional approaches and whether the variations are salutary. There are some themes to watch for as the texts unfold, and these themes provide a synopsis for the Reconceptualist perspective.

Scientism in education is treated with skepticism. No benefit of the doubt is extended to the Thorndikean aphorism, "Whatever exists, exists in quantity and can be measured." The Reconceptualists turn away from that perspective and practice comfortably in the world of subjectivity, narrative, and performance. The social scientific paradigm is regarded as a historical anachronism, symbolic of an academic worldview that failed and was displaced.

The Reconceptualists' track record suggests that they have consistently seen around the forthcoming curves in educational theory. They have done so in areas such as multicultural and gender studies, phenomenology/performance outcomes, critical theory, and life-span developmental psychology. Today the future they portend is beyond the debate between quantitative and qualitative methods to a time when the ambiguity, subjectivity, and consciousness-centered nature of education is accepted. The Reconceptualists are not fighting a rear-guard action, they have moved into the debates that will characterize the next century. They have assumed the

transcendence of their point of view and are implementing it.

If we as educators had full confidence in our traditions and distinctive professional values, we would expend less energy in responding to the agendas of others and more in defining what is distinctively "our way." The Reconceptualists provide a model for this approach. Once the context for debate is defined in the conventional way by the existing educational power structure, there is no hope of educators themselves, carrying the day. Our opportunity for social impact is through a redefinition of the terms of debate on "higher," more humane grounds. As long, for example, as our vocation directs us to liberate the lived experience of our students, but our evaluators judge us on grounds of California Achievement Tests, we cannot succeed in the public's eyes. We must present an insistent alternative to the status quo and one that we assert cannot be judged by the old conventions.

The Reconceptualists, for example, press the debate on multicultural and gender equity to its logical limits, including class and the distribution of wealth in their analysis. Their understanding of educational foundations penetrates the mythological veneer of mainstream approaches and looks hard at the increasing disparity of wealth, income, and opportunity that is occurring in our nation. This critical viewpoint addresses the growth of incarceration, its racial character, and the excesses of mandatory sentencing. The indifference we see in youth toward schooling may be rooted in the realization of the young that the curriculum they are offered is a cover-up--propaganda for the established order. Ours is the developed country with the highest rates of violent crime, incarceration, and wealth disparity. We may have reason to dissemble, but is anyone buying the myth? Or is it being met with passive resistance that looks like a lack of motivation toward schooling?

During the first half of this century psychologists such as Maslow and Jung gave education a secular purpose to replace the religious rationale that had traditionally sustained it. Their assertion that humans seek a fulfillment of personality, a realization of their spiritual qualities, has not yet been fully assimilated into life in schools and universities, although no rationale of equal power has been put forward as a source of human motivation. Reconceptualists design and teach curricula that account for this level of motivation. They do so through the use of humanities-based aesthetic

experience, as well as strictly cognitive material. By doing so, the Reconceptualists subsume the citizenship and economic agendas traditionally associated with public schools and, in addition, provide the spiritual sustenance that is lacking for many in our secular age. Of all professionals, educators are obliged to "aim high" and not underestimate the motives or potential of their clientele. This approach is characteristic of the Reconceptualists, but lacking in the life of schools in general--a symptom of confining, material expectations that pass as goals for education.

The central argument presented here is that progress in education is tied to self-regulation. The external authorities who dictate the shape of schooling and teacher education are drawing us deeper into the public's disfavor to the point where our basic institutions are continually threatened with dissolution. Public schools, teacher licensure, public administration of schools, teacher education, are all under attack. Our response is past due and cannot be argued around our critics' assumptions. It also follows that if our rationale for self-regulation is not based on our highest aspirations and most forward-looking theory, we do not merit the assumption of power.

We have authority in the field of ideas, if we choose to assert it. We can create forums for our view of education by using the institutions and organizations we have created. "Problems are never solved," Jung wrote, " but like clouds, as we ascend the mountain, we rise above them." Our approach must be to reestablish the context for debate about education, to *reconceptualize* our aims and methods of evaluation. In our own circles we have a group of scholars who--by disposition and training--have practiced and flourished outside the conventional value structure. At this point we should deliberately embrace their iconoclastic, but humane, perspective and in this way initiate a quest for leadership of our own field.

Is there any real alternative? After so many decades of bureaucratic suzerainty over the field, can anyone convincingly argue that we can move the agenda of schools by use of standardized scores and retention figures? We are in need of a transformation on the level of Progressivism, a radical reconfiguration about how we think of schools and students. The sources of transformation have been nurtured in our field by a scholarly group called Reconceptualists, and the moment of their use is with us.